Fostering Teamwork and Positivity
in Veterinary Teams

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We've all been in a workplace, on a shift, or in a social environment that has been "toxic." Negativity…pessimism… lack of motivation. Development of competitive, territorial, and adversarial relationships between team members. Complaining, gossiping, scapegoating. All of these behaviours represent a negative and toxic workplace that hampers productivity, increases employee turnover, and jeopardizes the professional reputation of your hospital.

In a 2019 survey of over a thousand American adults, the Society for Human Resource Management discovered that one fifth of employees have left a job in the past five years due to toxic workplace culture, while nearly half of respondents had considered leaving their current job for that same reason[1]. The report also estimated that the resulting turnover alone had cost US organizations more than $223 billion in revenue over the previous 5 years.

Staff in organizations with a negative culture are less happy, less motivated, and less productive[2]. Additionally, when a negative workplace culture is perceived by clients, it may damage the reputation of the business[3], corroding client confidence in your team's skills and expertise, and your commitment to their pets.

So, What Causes a Toxic Workplace?

Many factors have been proposed as the cultivating elements of a negative or toxic workplace culture. In particular, factors that decrease an employee's sense of connectedness, security, competence, and autonomy can lead to a negative mindset. Factors that decrease connectedness include poor communication within an organization, employee focus on individual rather than team success, and also isolation of teams, functions, or individuals in the workplace[4].

Next, factors that promote insecurity and decrease a sense of competence, include feedback that only flows in a downstream direction, focus on mistakes more than achievements, rapid changes in work environment, lack of direction and resources to perform tasks, and inconsistent or unpredictable rules, policies, and procedures[4, 5].

And finally, factors that decrease autonomy can include rigid rules and policies that override common sense or context; oppressive or abusive leadership, and lack of organizational support to collaborate or present innovative ideas[4, 5].

Although workplace toxicity decreases productivity and team success, it is not just

a leadership problem… it is an everyone problem. Staff take their stress and mental health insults home with them, damaging personal relationships and physical health, and contributing to burnout[6].

> **Clients and pets suffer when staff members are distracted or demotivated by toxic clinic environments.**

Often, team members will believe one or two co-workers are the source of toxicity… but all team members, and the entire organization are susceptible to negativity and responsible for its development. All employees are responsible for finding and supporting solutions.

Negativity is Contagious:

Psychological studies have shown that when people are exposed to even a single incident of low-intensity negative behaviour in others, something like rudeness for example, that exposure activates cognitive processes in the brain associated with negativity. It makes them more likely to notice and mirror those behaviours.[7] The researchers referred to this phenomenon as "Rude colored glasses."

Another study looked at "contented" and "discontented" feelings as if they were infectious diseases. Investigators used standard epidemiological math to measure how contented and discontented states spread between people. They demonstrated that negative emotions are indeed infectious. And, while positive emotions are also infectious, negative emotions are transmissible at double the rate! The same study demonstrated that people "infected" with negative emotions are more likely to be isolated. But there is good news! An infection with positivity lasted much longer than an infection with negativity[8]. The interpretation is that, while we may have to work harder and be more intentional to spread positivity, the payoff is greater.

Positivity and Resilience:

"Resilience" is the ability of a person or a team to withstand challenges and recover from disappointments, while maintaining an ability to function and even thrive. Positive teams are more resilient, and resilient teams are better at maintaining their positivity. Resilience helps to protect against stress and burnout[9,10]. This means that if you invest in cultivating positivity in your team, they will be better equipped to face a bad yelp review, a nail-biting surgery, or a co-worker's bad day, and remain positive, productive, and engaged.

Considering Failed Strategies:

It can be tempting to fire team members who appear to the be epicenter of negativity. In the current hiring crisis, managers may also consider "non-dismissal" punishments like demotion, reduced schedule flexibility, and withdrawal of other job perks to motivate employees to change their behaviour. But does fighting negativity with negativity work? Just like aversive dog training strategies do not create a calm, confident, and well-behaved dog; punishments do not cultivate positive, motivated employees.

> **Negative feedback like complaints, criticism or penalties have been shown to have a negative impact on motivation[11].**

Interestingly traditional rewards and incentives are not always enough to successfully change bad behaviour either. Psychological studies have shown that rewards need to be carefully designed and supportive of an employee's perception that they are doing meaningful work, in order to be effective. In some cases, rewards have actually been shown to have a negative effect on the conduct of people who exhibited the desired behaviour all along[12, 13].

Additionally, reparative measures like staff yoga, massages, and foosball tables intended to mitigate stress and improve engagement do not have significant impacts on overall morale when they are not offered with other tools to build resilience[14].

Rewards, punishments, and reparative measures are all forms of extrinsic motivation. Studies have shown that intrinsic motivation – a drive that emanates from within an individual – is far more effective for creating behaviour change, generating happiness, and improving productivity. Employees chase significance within their organizations more than they chase rewards [14]. So, let's talk about building intrinsic motivation through positivity.

Self Determination Theory:

Self determination theory is an argument in psychology that proposes that intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation. It asserts that people are more motivated, happier, and more productive when they are provided with a sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence[15]. Not only do motivated people create a great work environment, but they work harder, and get more done.

Relatedness:
Foster a Team Attitude

Foster a team attitude. Do it during meetings and staff events, but also (and especially) when it's business as usual. Too often dysfunctional relationships develop among clinic staff and interfere with their ability to work as a team. Building teamwork requires the right nourishment. Relationships between team members need to be built with intent, practiced, and maintained.

People have a deep psychological need for connectedness, acceptance and belonging[16]. A feeling of belonging is a powerful force for shaping human behaviour[16,17]. Sports teams, gyms, luxury brands, and MLM sales companies all use this psychological tool to attract and motivate both customers and staff. Communication, management, and workflow needs to demonstrate to staff members that they belong within the team.

Team members need to trust each other in order to communicate effectively, to feel safe providing feedback and presenting ideas, and also to function efficiently every day[18]. Team building activities give people the opportunity to bond in a non-work capacity,

understand co-worker's perspectives, and build rapport.

Send team members to CE in pairs! Or, get out of the clinic to have a little fun together regularly throughout the year. Once you've had a chance to relax and shake off the residual tension of the workplace, work on connecting on a more personal level. Consider contracting a professional to help you design impactful team-bonding activities.

Back in the clinic, pair different team members together for work. Separate cliques… not all the time - friends at work are important - but at routine intervals. Recognize when people are being "outsiders" and pull them into group projects or special initiatives. Solve problems and make decisions as a group. For example, when creating clinic protocols, include all team members so that everyone feels a sense of control and ownership in the decisions.

You can never eliminate the challenge of personalities that just don't mesh. But fostering a team attitude can build a feeling of belonging that can soften the impact of negative interpersonal relationships. And it can focus your team on common goals.

Be cautious with staff meetings. They sometimes devolve into "airing of the grievances" instead of focusing on encouragement and problem-solving. As we discussed earlier, negative feedback can stifle motivation[11]. Additionally, careless criticism can decrease a person's feeling of belonging. If you must address problems with a team member, do so privately. Schedule one-on-one meetings between team members and management regularly, and not just when there are performance or interpersonal concerns, so that you can discuss ideas, solutions, and other positive input…

Teamwork does not mean that team members can never share criticism or point out problems. An effective team holds members accountable for their work. But when criticisms are made, they should be done in a positive and encouraging way. "How can I help you master this?" A complaint should not be expressed without the support of education or the proposal of a solution. This allows criticism to be received with the gratitude of a "make me better" mindset, rather than with offense. All team members should pledge to provide and receive criticism with a growth-focused attitude at the outset of any project or team-building exercise.

When recruiting and hiring new team members, consider hiring the best person for the team, rather than the best person for the job. A highly skilled or talented candidate may not improve your hospital's productivity or reputation if they bring a negative attitude that disrupts your team.

Autonomy and Ownership Through Participation

Learn the unique strengths and aptitudes of each team member. If you need input, consider getting other staff members to list the top three strengths of each of their co-workers. Encourage each person to participate where they're most valuable. This will demonstrate how much you appreciate team members and respect their talents

and input! Participation creates a sense of ownership in clinic success. When a person participates in solving problems, developing protocols, and creating culture, they feel a sense of autonomy…they feel in control of their own destiny, and in turn, they will experience more intrinsic motivation, exert more effort, and they will be happier at work. Participation, ownership, and autonomy are nourished by communication, trust, training, and internal growth and advancement opportunities[14].

Harness Positivity

As part of building your team and promoting participation and autonomy, you have already sussed out the strengths and aptitudes of all of your team members. Now you need to celebrate that. It has been shown that

> **unexpected positive feedback has a very beneficial impact on motivation.[19]**

In the course of a busy day, compliment team members on their achievements, and encourage every employee to do the same. This behaviour requires practice before it starts to feel natural. If on-the-fly compliments feel forced, start by introducing a "shout-out" agenda item in staff meetings. During this segment, any staff member can draw attention to the contributions of a co-worker. Not only does this foster a feeling of belonging, but it also reinforces each team member's confidence in their skills and value, combating things like self-doubt, and supporting buy-in to the clinic's culture, objectives, and policies.

Don't forget to emphasize the value of your nursing staff and the care they provide. Your clients will begin to see the expertise in the behind-the-scenes work technicians do. This will expose these team members to the positive client feedback that often just gets directed at the veterinarians. Calling out your technicians' skills will improve client understanding and acceptance of nursing-related fees while also boosting the confidence and professional satisfaction of these indispensable colleagues.

Recognizing the skills and accomplishments of team members, and building them up is vital to positivity, teamwork, and clinic success. Self-doubt is a very loud voice that leads to hesitation, inefficiency, weak communication, and negative behaviours. It takes a consistent and positive external reassurance to overcome this. It's worthwhile to encourage the staff in front of you, in order to uncover the collaborative superstars you've always dreamed of.

Keep an Eye on Linguistics and Self-talk

The words that we use have a significant impact on both the message we send, and the way we feel when we send it[20, 21]. Imagine you're on an airplane, and the flight attendant makes this announcement:

"We are pleased to welcome the talented Captain Baker on board for her first flight as a member of the ABC airlines team!"

Now imagine the flight attendant simply drops this:

"The pilot is a new hire."

The core bit of information is the same, but the message received by passengers is very different. The words you choose can have a significant impact on the mindset of your staff and clients. Be on the lookout for negative language habits in your clinic and client communications. In particular, look for language habits that decrease the value of team members or services.

"I'm just the receptionist."

"You'll only be seeing the technician today."

"The doctor is a new grad."

"It's a simple spay procedure."

Work as a team to choose more powerful alternatives that endorse the value of your staff and their skills. Recognize people as they adopt the linguistic changes. This can enhance both staff and client perception of the value of the work, making it feel more meaningful, and reinforce staff members' feeling of significance within the team. Language can be the subtle, encouraging feedback that gives people the sense of knowledgeability, connectedness, and value that they need to stay positive.

In a similar vein, introduce team members to the concept of positive self-talk. Not only should staff compliment others, but they should train themselves to see their own strengths and achievements.

When clients decline recommendations and treatment plans have to be pared back, it's easy for veterinarians to tell themselves they've failed. With that, they become demotivated, and they lose confidence, not only in their clients, but in their own ability to communicate value and get the job done. This is a perfect culture medium for negativity and toxic behaviour.

But if veterinarians tell themselves that they did a great job meeting a client where they were; they did a great job crafting a compassionate plan with both the pet and the client's welfare in mind; they will build

their own confidence and celebrate their own skills. Whenever vets recommend a service, they educate the client about the power, value, and cost of veterinary science. If a service is declined, it represents a valuable option offered. Any steps taken after a service is declined represents the veterinary team's flexibility and innovation and ability to heal patients with limited resources.

Client behaviour and patient outcomes can be difficult to control. But with practice, the way team members react emotionally to external stimuli can be trained to change. When people work within a positive team and have a positive mindset, they can be more resilient to the negative experiences served up by outside influences like client behaviour, co-worker behaviour, patient outcomes, and other inherent job stresses.

Practice, Maintenance, and Reinforcement

It's not unusual for a clinic to embark on a cultural overhaul. A plan is made, and there is much excitement at first. But gradually and inevitably, the enthusiasm wanes. Challenges are encountered, and people get discouraged.

Building and maintaining healthy, positive teams is hard, and it takes time. It requires a lot of effort up front. It requires intentional exercise and practice, monitoring, check-ins, and maintenance. Before you schedule that first team-bonding event, you must create a plan for how you're going to keep the momentum going. And write it down.

Designate a leader in your clinic for culture and teamwork,

and dedicate a weekly number of hours for that person to spend on these initiatives. Identify the daily, weekly, and monthly activities and objectives for your transformation. Decide how you're going to monitor your progress.

Schedule time for regular team events, staff education, and follow-ups.

Design daily two-minute positivity exercises that each team member should perform such as reflecting on a personal strength, acknowledging another team member's work, providing positive feedback, teaching a co-worker something new, or participating in a clinic initiative. And set aside a static part of all of your staff meetings and one-on-ones for positive feedback and team participation.

Summary

To build and motivate positivity, look to the Self Determination Theory of psychology to find the recipe for a healthy clinic culture. Foster a team attitude by ensuring that all staff know that they belong. Let them know that it is their place to participate and share ideas. Re-train attitudes towards giving and receiving constructive criticism. Make sure everyone has a place at the table for building clinic protocols and culture. Practice positivity and give genuine compliments often. Use language to reinforce your team's value and expertise, and coach positive self talk.

You all do amazing work every day to change the lives of pets and their owners. I encourage you to adapt the information from this article to change the daily work lives of yourself, and your talented colleagues. **You deserve it!**

About the Author

Dr. Jennifer Sperry is a companion animal veterinarian and the Veterinary Advisor for Independence Pet Group. She assists the company by providing scientific insights and medical updates; and by sharing the perspectives and experiences of veterinary professionals in the trenches.

Dr. Sperry was attracted to her current role because she recognized an urgent need to spread awareness about financial tools that allow people to access vital but costly veterinary care. As a veterinarian practicing in general and emergency medicine for more than a decade, she has a unique understanding of the needs of pets and their people. She witnessed first-hand how difficult it can be for pet owners to both predict and overcome the cost of quality veterinary care. She also experienced how difficult it can be for veterinary team members to share the emotional burden that occurs when financial limitations adversely impact the wellbeing of pets and their owners.

Since joining the team in 2020, Dr. Sperry has shared her medical experience for internal and external educational events, claims and underwriting process improvements, and even accessible policy wording.

Dr. Sperry shares her home with her husband, two young boys, and a cranky old chihuahua. When she's not working, she can be found beside the nearest campfire.

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